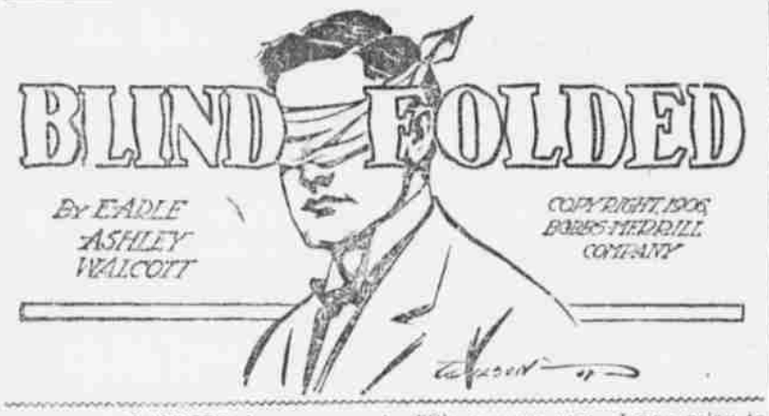



CHAPTER I.

A Dangerous Errand.

A city of hills with a fringe of houses crowning the lower heights; half-mountains rising bare in the background and becoming real mountains as they stretched away in the distance to right and left; a confused mass of buildings coming to the water's edge on the flat; a forest of masts, ships swinging in the stream, and the streaked, yellow, gray-green waters of the bay taking a cold light from the setting sun as it struggled through the wisps of fog that fluttered above the serrated sky-line of the city—these were my first impressions of San Francisco.

The wind blew fresh and chill from the west with the damp and salt of the Pacific heavy upon it, as I breasted it from the forward deck of the ferry steamer, El Capitan. As I drank in the air and was silent with admiration of the beautiful panorama that was spread before me, my companion touched me on the arm.

"Come into my cabin," he said. "You'll be one of those fellows who can't come to San Francisco without catching his death of cold, and then lays it on to the climate instead of his own lack of common sense. Come, I can't spare you, now I've got you here at last. I wouldn't lose you for a million dollars."

"I'll come for half the money," I returned, as he took me by the arm and led me into the close cabin.

My companion, I should explain, was Henry Wilton, the son of my father's cousin, who had the advantages of a few years of residence in California, and sported all the airs of a pioneer. We had been close friends through boyhood and youth, and it was on his offer of employment that I had come to the city by the Golden Gate.

"What a resemblance!" I heard a woman exclaim, as we entered the cabin. "They must be twins."

"Hush, Henry," I whispered with a laugh, "you see we are discovered." Though our relationship was not close we had been cast in the mold of some common ancestor. We were so nearly alike in form and feature as to perplex all but our intimate acquaintances, and we had made the resemblance the occasion of many tricks in our boyhood days.

Henry had heard the exclamation as well as I. To my surprise, it appeared to bring him annoyance or apprehension rather than amusement.

"I had forgotten that it would make us conspicuous," he said, more to himself than to me, I thought; and he glanced through the cabin as though he looked for some peril.

"We were used to that long ago," I said, as we found a seat. "Is the business ready for me? You wrote that you thought it would be in hand by the time I got here."

"We can't talk about it here," he said in a low tone. "There is plenty of work to be done. It's not hard, but, as I wrote you, it needs a man of pluck and discretion. It's delicate business, you understand, and dangerous if you can't keep your head. But the danger won't be yours. I've got that end of it."

"Of course you're not trying to do anything against the law?" I said.

"Oh, it has nothing to do with the law," he replied with an odd smile. "In fact, it's a little matter in which we are—well, you might say—outside the law."

I gave a gasp at this distressing suggestion, and Henry chuckled as he saw the consternation written on my face. Then he rose and said:

"Come, the boat is getting in."

"But I want to know—" I began.

"Oh, bother your 'want-to-knows.' It's not against the law—just outside it, you understand. I'll tell you more of it when we get to my room. Give me that valise. Come along now." And as the boat entered the slip we found ourselves at the front of the pressing crowd that is always surging in and out of San Francisco by the gateway of the Market Street ferry.

As we pushed our way through the clamoring hack-drivers and hotel-runners who blocked the entrance to the city, I was roused by a sudden thrill of the instinct of danger that warns one when he meets the eye of a snake. It was gone in an instant, but I had time to trace effect to cause. The warning came this time from the eyes of a man, a lithe, keen-faced man who flashed a look of triumphant malice on us as he disappeared in the waiting-room of the ferry-shed. But the keen face and the basilisk glance were burned into my mind in that moment as deeply as though I had known then what evil was behind them.

My companion swore softly to himself.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"Don't look around," he said. "We are watched."

"The snake-eyed man?"

"Did you see him, too?" His manner was careless, but his tone was troubled. "I thought I had given him the slip," he continued. "Well, there's no help for it now."

"Are we to hunt for a hiding-place?" I asked doubtfully.

"Oh, no; not now. I was going to take you direct to my room. Now we are going to a hotel with all the publicity we can get. Here we are."

In another moment we were in a lumbering coach, and were whirling over the rough pavement, through a confusing maze of streets, past long rows of dingy, ugly buildings, to the hotel.

"A room for the night," ordered Henry, as we entered the hotel office and saluted the clerk.

"Your brother will sleep with you?" inquired the clerk.

"Yes."

Henry paid the bill, took the key, and we were shown to our room. After removing the travel-stains, I declared myself quite ready to dine.

"We won't need this again," said Henry, tossing the key on the bureau as we left. "Or no, on second thought," he continued, "it's just as well to leave the door locked. There might be some inquisitive callers." And we betook ourselves to a hasty meal that was not of a nature to raise my opinion of San Francisco.

"Are you through?" asked my companion, as I shook my head over a melancholy piece of pie, and laid down my fork. "Well, take your bag. This door—look pleasant and say nothing."

He led the way to the bar and then through a back room or two, until with a turn we were in a blind alley. After a pause to observe the street before we ventured forth, Henry said:

"I guess we're all right now. We must chance it, anyhow." So we dodged along in the shadow till we came to Montgomery Street, and after a brief walk, turned into a gloomy doorway and mounted a worn pair of stairs.

The house was three stories in height. It stood on the corner of an alley, and the lower floor was intended for a store or saloon; but a renting agent's sign and a collection of old show-bills ornamenting the dirty windows testified that it was vacant.

"This isn't just the place I'd choose for entertaining friends," said Henry, with a visible relief from his uneasiness, as we climbed the worn and dirty stair.

"Oh, that's all right," I said, magnanimously accepting his apology.

"It doesn't have all the modern conveniences," admitted Henry as we stumbled up the second flight, "but it's suitable to the business we have in hand, and—"

"What's that?" I exclaimed, as a creaking, rasping sound came from the hall below.

We stopped and listened, peering into obscurity beneath.

"It must have been outside," said Henry, and opened the door of the last room on the right of the hall.

The room was at the rear corner of the building. There were two windows, one looking to the west, the other to the north and opening on the narrow alley.

"Not so bad after you get in," said Henry, half as an introduction, half as an apology.

"It's luxury after six days of railroading," I replied.

"Well, lie down there, and make the most of it, then," he said, "for there may be trouble ahead." And he listened again at the crack of the door.

"In Heaven's name, Henry, what's up?" I exclaimed with some temper. "You're as full of mysteries as a dime novel."

Henry smiled grimly.

"Maybe you don't recognize that this is serious business," he said.

I was about to protest that I could not know too much, when Henry raised his hand with a warning to silence. I heard the sound of a cautious step outside. Then Henry sprang to the door, flung it open, and bolted down the passage. There was the gleam of a revolver in his hand. I hurried after him, but as I crossed the threshold he was coming softly back, with finger on his lips.

"I must see to the guards again. I can have them together by midnight."

"Can I help?"

"No. Just wait here till I get back. Bolt the door, and let nobody in but me. It isn't likely that they will try to do anything before midnight. If they do—well, here's a revolver. Shoot through the door if anybody tries to break it down."

I stood in the door, revolver in hand, watched him down the hall, and listened to his footsteps as they descended the stairs and at last faded away into the murmur of life that came up from the open street.

CHAPTER II.

A Cry for Help.

I hastily closed and locked the door. Then I rallied my spirits with something of resolution, and shamed myself with the reproach that I should fear to share any danger that Henry was ready to face. Wearied as I was with travel, I was too much excited for sleep. Reading was equally impossible. I scarcely glanced at the shelf of books that hung on the wall, and turned to a study of my surroundings.

The room was on the corner, as I have said, and I threw up the sash of the west window and looked out over a tangle of old buildings, ramshackle sheds, and an alley that appeared to lead nowhere.

Some sound of a drunken quarrel drew my attention to the north window, and I looked out into the alley. There were shouts and curses, and one protesting, struggling inebriate was hurled out from the front door and left, with threats and foul language, to collect himself from the pavement.

This edifying incident, which was explained to me solely by sound, had scarcely come to an end when a noise of creaking boards drew my eyes to the other window. The shutter suddenly flew around, and a human figure swung in at the open casing.

"S-h-h!" came the warning whisper, and I recognized my supposed robber. It was Henry.

"Don't speak out loud," he said in suppressed tones. "Wait till I fasten this shutter."

"Shall I shut the window?" I asked, thoroughly impressed by his manner.

"No, you'll make too much noise," he said, stripping off his coat and vest. "Here, change clothes with me. Quick! It's a case of life and death. I must be out of here in two minutes. Do as I say, now. Don't ask questions. I'll tell you about it in a day or two. No, just the coat and vest. There—give me that collar and tie. Where's your hat?"

The changes were completed, or rather his were, and he stood looking as much like me as could be imagined.

"Don't stir from this room till I come back," he whispered. "You can dress in anything of mine you like. I'll be in before twelve, or send a messenger if I'm not coming. By-by."

He was gone before I could say a word, and only an occasional creaking board told me of his progress down the stairs. He had evidently had some practice in getting about quietly. I could only wonder, as I closed and locked the door, whether it was the police or a private enemy that he was trying to avoid.

I had small time to speculate on the possibilities, for outside the window I heard the single word, "Help!"

I rushed to the window and looked out. A band of half a dozen men was struggling and pushing away from Montgomery Street into the darker end of the alley. They were nearly under the window.

"Give it to him," said a voice.

In an instant there came a scream of agony. Then a light showed and a tall, broad-shouldered figure leaped back.

"These aren't the papers," it hissed. "Curse you, you've got the wrong man!"

There was a moment of confusion, and the light flashed on the man who had spoken and was gone. But the flash had shown me the face of a man I could never forget. It was a strong, cruel, wolfish face—the face of a man near sixty, with a fierce yellow-gray mustache and imperial—a face broad at the temples and tapering down into a firm, unyielding jaw, and marked then with all the lines of rage, hatred, and chagrin at the failure of his plans.

It took not a second for me to see and hear and know all this, for the vision came and was gone in the drooping of an eyelid. And then there echoed through the alley loud cries of "Police! Murder! Help!" I was conscious that there was a man running through the hall and down the rickety stairs, making the building ring to the same cries.

It was thus with a feeling of surprise that I found myself in the street, and came to know that the cries for help had come from me, and that I was the man who had run through the hall and down the stairs shouting for the police. The street was empty.

Fortunately the policeman on the beat was at hand, and I hailed him excitedly.

"Only rolling a drunk," he said lightly, as I told of what I had seen.

"No, it's worse than that I insisted. "There was murder done, and I'm afraid it's my friend."

He listened more attentively as I told him how Henry had left the house just before the cry for help had risen.

"It's a nasty place," he continued. "It's lucky I've got a light." He brought up a dark lantern from his overcoat pocket, and stood in the shelter of the building as he lighted it. "There's not many as carries 'em," he continued, "but they're mighty handy at times."

We made our way to the point beneath the window, where the men had stood.

There was nothing to be seen—no sign of struggle, no shred of torn clothing, no drop of blood. Body, traces and all had disappeared.

CHAPTER III.

A Question in the Night.

I was stricken dumb at this end to the investigation, and half doubted the evidence of my eyes.

"Well," said the policeman, with a sigh of relief, "there's nothing here."

I suspected that his doubts of my sanity were returning.

"Here is where it was done," I asserted stoutly, pointing to the spot where I had seen the struggling group from the window. "There were surely five or six men in it."

"It's hard to make sure of things from above in this light," said the policeman, hinting once more his suspicion that I was confusing dreams with reality.

"There was no mistaking that job," I said. "See here, the alley leads farther back. Bring your light."

A few paces farther the alley turned at a right angle to the north. We looked narrowly for a body, and then for traces that might give hint of the passage of a party.

"Nothing here," said the policeman, as we came out on the other street. "Maybe they've carried him into one of these back-door dens, and maybe they whisked him into a hack here, and are a mile or two away by now."

"But we must follow them. He may be only wounded and can be rescued. And these men can be caught." I was almost hysterical in my eagerness.

"Aisy, aisy, now," said the policeman. "Go back to your room, now. That's the safest place for you, and you can't do nothin' at all out here. I'll report the case to the head office, an' we'll send out the alarm to the force. Now, here's your door. Just rest aisy, and they'll let you know if anything's found."

And he passed on, leaving me dazed with dread and despair in the entrance of the fateful house.

Once more in the room to wait till morning should give me a chance to work, I looked about the dingy place with a heart sunk to the lowest depths. I was alone in the face of this mystery. I had not one friend in the city to whom I could appeal for sympathy, advice or money. Yet I should need all of these to follow this business to the end—to learn the fate of my cousin, to rescue him, if alive and to avenge him, if dead.

Then, in the hope that I might find something among Henry's effects to give me a clue to the men who had attacked him, I went carefully through his clothes and papers. But I found that he did not leave memoranda of his business lying about. The only scrap that could have a possible bearing on it was a sheet of paper in the coat he had changed with me. It bore a rough map, showing a road branching thrice, with crosses marked here and there upon it. Underneath was written:

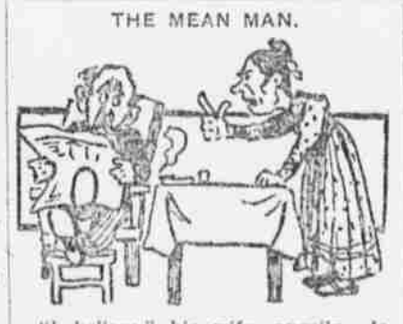
"Third road—cockneyed barn—iron cow."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

"DON'T LOOK AROUND" HE SAID, "WE ARE WATCHED."



THE MEAN MAN.



"I believe," his wife angrily declared, "that if I were dead you would be married again inside of a year."

"Oh, no," the mean man replied, "you are mistaken. Try me and I'll prove it."



Gladstone's Thrift.

Gladstone's liberality . . . was very great, and was curiously accompanied by his love of small economies—his determination to have the proper discount taken off the price of his second-hand books, his horror of a wasted half sheet of note paper, which almost equaled his detestation of a wasted minute.—Recollections of Sir Algernon West.



There is no interest worth consideration that does not run in the direction of duty.—Grimshaw.



No honestly exerted force can be utterly lost.—Froude.